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# ÉMILE VERHAEREN

BY O. F. THEIS

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Two of the most significant figures in recent French literature, Maeterlinck and Verhaeren, are not French at all, but Belgian. Of these, Maeterlinck, through translation and abundant critical (and much uncritical) commentary, has become more familiar even than many prominent English writers, while Verhaeren, the more potent and creatively the greater artist, is hardly more than a name to most readers. Yet he has introduced a new modality into poetry not in France alone, but in other countries. In Germany, writers like Stefan Zweig and Johannes Schlaf, themselves poets of distinction, have translated his work; in Russia, Brjussow, an esteemed poet, has made versions that have made him known there; in Scandinavia, Ellen Key has devoted essays to him, and George Brandes, one of the greatest of living critics, has praised him with enthusiastic acclaim.

All who are sensitive to rhythm and the sweep of poetic passion must remember the time when they first read and were carried away by Swinburne's marvelous innovation which disclosed hitherto unsuspected potentialities in English poetry. Something similar is the feeling when Verhaeren is read for the first time, except that the break from traditional forms is even more marked, for Swinburne, after all, retained much of the outer shell of poetry, both in the subjects he chose and in his phraseology. Verhaeren in his most characteristic work has created entirely new values.

Temperamentally and artistically Verhaeren is a Norseman. His violent individualism, his subjective depths, his often tragic vision of life, and the richness of his imagination indicate this in almost every line. There is something volcanic about him that makes it a curious destiny that he

should have expressed his visions in French, a language which is made rather for delicate sensations and the refinement of rhetoric, and where poetry is so fenced in by law and tradition. That he succeeded is all the more proof of his extraordinary power, for in his sphere he stands alone and apart from his poetic generation. Perhaps the very restrictions of French verse were a benefit; for otherwise what his work has gained in translucency might have been dissipated in vagueness and eccentricity.

French poetry is as a rule reflective. The intellectual element usually predominates. This has given the beautiful clarity and exquisite form to so much of what is best in French poetry. In Verhaeren the emotional is almost always in the ascendant. It seems as if he ever wished "to immortalize the most vivid moments" of life and to transfuse their quintessence into his poetry. The "lyrical cry" almost always rises high in his work, but it never breaks into the high-pitched note of hysteria, for he is a careful artist.

Verhaeren is the poet of modernity, who, however, does not love the new simply because it is new. Nor is he modern in the sense of refinement of analysis, or the overwrought nerves and neurasthenia which find expression in the pages of Huysmans, in whom the blood of the Lowlands also flowed. But Verhaeren is modern in that he has seized the rhythm of his time which is different from that of any other period. Machinery, democracy, rapid movement from one part of the world to another, huge agglomerations of humanity in cities, industrialism—these are only a few of the new things which differentiate the present from the past. These he has made his own both in their outward aspects and in their æsthetic and ethical significance.

He was born at Saint Amand, a suburb of Antwerp, on May 21, 1855. His father, a well-to-do merchant, had retired from active business and lived in a small house immediately behind the hedges of which the marvelous landscape of Flanders unfolded itself. In *Tendresses Premières*, a book he wrote many years later, Verhaeren has paid tender tribute to the happiness of his childhood days.

At the age of thirteen or fourteen he was sent to the Jesuit School, St. Barbe, at Ghent. In the school-room there he met Georges Rodenbach, who was destined also to become a distinguished poet, and a deep intimacy was

formed. It is interesting that a few years later another unique literary friendship began at St. Barbe, that of Maeterlinck and Charles Van Lenberghe. Verhaeren and Maeterlinck are still in the midst of their creative labors, while both Rodenbach and Van Lenberghe are dead.

It had been the family plan to have Verhaeren enter his uncle's factory at the completion of his school days. While poetry had not yet come into his life, he was nevertheless disinclined toward commercial pursuits, and to gain time he took up the study of law at the University of Louvain, an institution permeated with conservatism and deeply religious in atmosphere. It was from here that the Father Damien came to whom Stevenson has paid so wonderful a tribute. During his university days he threw himself with characteristic zest into the riotous Flemish life. They were days too when new literary ideals were in full ferment in France. The revolt of the Parnassians had taken place, and the counter-revolt against them; naturalism was beginning to enter upon its excessive but tonic course. Echoes of these movements passed over into Belgium. With others Verhaeren founded one of the inevitable journals, which was soon suppressed by the university authorities.

Before his admission to the bar in 1881, he had found his true vocation; and after it, he spent more time over the books in the Royal Library, than over briefs. Soon he gave himself up entirely to literature, to which he has remained faithful ever since. Later he traveled extensively in Germany, Italy, Spain, and England; he preferred London's black massiveness of soot and ugliness to smiling Florence. With an intensity so passionate that it brought on a physical and mental crisis, he tried to absorb and experience all the thoughts and facts of modern life, and for several years he was almost an invalid. During the summer he now lives at Caillou, a little hamlet in Wallonia, and during the winter at St. Cloud, near Paris, where he is on intimate terms with the great men of contemporary France—men like Rodin, Maeterlinck, Lemonnier, Meunier, and André Gide.

His first volume, *Les Flamandes*, was brought out under the auspices of Camille Lemonnier, the dean of Belgian letters, who died on June 14, 1913. It contains much that is immature, and was of such turbulent violence that his family and the conservatives

among the critics were scandalized. Flanders had been insulted, they claimed, and to cry down the young author they labeled him "barbarian"; but even those hostile to him had to concede that a new force had entered Belgian literature. There is nothing soft or conventionally poetical in these poems. While the old metrical forms are retained, they foreshadow the freer measures which were later to be his distinctive innovation. The Alexandrines bulge under the explosiveness of his metaphors. The excessive, superabundant health and vitality of Flemish life, like that which appears in the canvases of Rubens, runs through these poems. His realism is as uncompromising as that of Rembrandt. His peasants are from the soil, "black, unhewn, bestial," not deodorized for ladies' boudoirs. One of his critics has called these poems, "red streaming tatters of flesh torn from the body of life." Wonderful as they are in their passion and their glowing colors, they are pictorial and descriptive rather than poetical.

This is almost true of his second book, *Les Moines*, in which many of the poems have an almost Parnassian coldness; but here he shows the other side of Flanders, the land of shadows and *clair-obscur*, and an intimate spiritual life in the silence of which the mysticism of Maeterlinck has root. In subdued colors, he has drawn sharply individualized portraits of the different types of monks and their conflicts among themselves. Through the monks runs the unifying bond of the order, which leads them all toward a single end. It is characteristic of Verhaeren that he admires them not so much because of any traditional religious faith that is left in him, as because of their ceaseless energy in and devotion to what seems a lost cause. Without complaint they suffer and die for their ideal. At this time beauty still represented the past to Verhaeren, and the monks were to him the living symbols of Flemish history and greatness. He sympathizes with their endeavors, and understands them spiritually, but his view is always æsthetic. Before the book was written he had spent a short period in a monastery.

It seems that Verhaeren has himself felt the poetic insufficiency in these early works, for in his maturity, when he had found his measure, he recreated these two aspects of Flanders: the one in his tragedy, *Le Cloître*, and the other in the great pentology, *Toute la Flandre*.

During the years when his health was broken and a mental crisis followed, the famous trilogy, often known as the "trilogy of sorrow," was produced. It comprises *Les Soirs*, *Les Débâcles*, and *Les Flambeaux Noirs*. Many of the poems in these volumes were written in London, where the outer aspect of brutality and somber ugliness corresponded strangely with the poet's mood. Seldom have more exasperated lines been written. Their vehemence is almost paroxysmal, and they indicate a state of mind dwelling in a borderland where another step would have meant descent into the abyss of madness. As if fascinated by the prospect, he lays bare with a cruel scalpel the wounds of the self, for in these volumes the poet is primarily subjective. To the very end he traces out the threads of the aching nerves. Negation and the senselessness of life seem inextricably interwoven. Acute as is the pain, the poet never whines. In a general way *Les Bords de la Route* also belongs to the same period.

In the landscape of these books, to quote a passage from Stefan Zweig's brilliant study of Verhaeren:

"All the colors of life have become extinguished, no star gleams in this steel-gray metallic sky, nothing but a cruel cold moon sometimes glides over it with an ironic smile. They are books of fallow nights in which the clouds shut out the sky with huge wings, the world contracts, and the hours like cold heavy chains surround everything. An icy coldness fills these works. '*Il gèle*'—it freezes—so a poem begins, and this shuddering note rings like the howling of dogs, again and again, over the endless plain. The sun is dead, dead are the flowers and trees and even the morasses are frozen in these white midnights."

Death seemed the only way out of the blind alley where he found himself, but slowly health returned and with it his indomitable will. He flung himself out in the midst of life and reality to conquer it, and he has never left it since. The two succeeding volumes, *Les Apparatus dans mes Chemins* and *Les Campagnes Hallucinées*, are quieter in tone after this grief and pride, and a feeling as of resurrection runs through them.

From now on Verhaeren becomes the poet of affirmation and the creator of new values. He has found freedom and at the same time the unique and distinctive element of his verse—the *vers libre*, or free meter. In his case the meter did not originate in any self-conscious theoretical considerations, but rather was a necessity which the new themes that he discovered made imperative.

Verhaeren's *vers libre* is neither eccentric nor haphazard. Henry James has somewhere said that triumphs in verse are only "won through the exercise of art." The *vers libre* in the hands of a master like Verhaeren is intricate and complex; it requires the highest art to make it succeed; it has widened the scope of poetic expression.

Rhyme is retained, but the rhyming scheme is irregular; sometimes assonances are substituted. Rhythm, as must be the case in all poetry, is its fundamental principle. Its varying lines permit a harmony between sound and sense which cannot be obtained in the quadrangular stanzaic form, and it recalls the intimate association between the words and music of the great song-writers. It might almost be called symphonic in structure. A somewhat similar struggle for greater metrical freedom is found in Henley's *London Voluntaries* and James Thomson's dithyrambic poems.

It is a commonplace that Whistler was the first to endow the unlovely banks of the Thames with beauty, and Degas ballet girls and physically repulsive women at the bath. To do this a new technique was required against which the Academicians, of course, raised their voices in protest. Verhaeren in poetry also created a new form of expression, and the *vers libre* was the implement which made it technically possible.

As already stated, Verhaeren turned toward reality. In *Les Campagnes Hallucinées* and *Les Villages Illusoires* his changed attitude toward life is reflected. The Flemish landscape reappears, often, it is true, a mournful and forsaken landscape, for its people have been drawn to the cities by the modern industrial movement. In these volumes are found the wonderful poems on "The Rain," "The Snow," and "The November Wind," poems of marvelous onomatopoeitic content in which is concentrated the essence of all that these great natural phenomena may evoke in atmosphere and mood. Here also are the poems on the simple people of the simple trades—the miller, the ferryman, the bell-ringer, the smith,—and they become synthesized into epic and heroic proportions like the humble peasants in Millet's paintings.

"This splendid smith, forging the future on his anvil while he chants his dream, has the same gesture as Siegfried in the cave of the Nibelung beating the sword of victory, and from far away he foretells the new sense of humanity

which is to enter the lines of the poet." So says Leon Bazalgette, the translator into French of Walt Whitman.

Parenthetically it may here be stated that Verhaeren has certain affinities with Whitman, but where the latter is often uncouth and merely eccentric, as even admirers must admit, Verhaeren is always the finished artist. Something of the same great vision dominates both; but Whitman's is often provincial, showing that he is the product of a new civilization. Verhaeren is the offspring of an old race, and the background of centuries of European culture gleams through his poetry, leaving the golden traces of art and craftsmanship.

In *Les Villes Tentaculaires* (1895) this promise is fulfilled in part. Here the modern city appears for the first time in poetry in all its multiformity. The city of to-day is something different from anything that has been before. The many-headed crowd is there, made up largely of those that have been uprooted from their native soil. A new strange blood—money, gold—seems to flow in the veins of the multitude, driving it with new energy to ends that cannot be anticipated. "What an ocean these hearts, what a tangled knot of wills, squeezed in its mystery!" he exclaims. All the new things are here in a microcosm—factories that swarm with human beings and vomit black smoke, electricity, steam, machines, steel, iron, wood, concrete, tramways, railways, above all noise and restlessness. Even night brings no peace—lights flash up a hundred thousand fold, music resounds, theaters open their doors, prostitutes ply their trade. Among the subjects which are treated in separate poems in this volume are "The Bourse," where the desire for gold is mad amid the cries of the buyers and sellers; "The Factory," where half-naked human beings toil under the glow of lightning-like flames, and others sit like automatons going through the same gestures with ceaseless beat; "The Bazaars," with their crowds, dust, and stifling heat; "The Emigrants," inveigled by crafty agents on their way to the city, sad, forlorn, lost creatures; "The Music Hall," where jaded appetites are whipped by lustful flesh; "The Revolt," an overwhelming study of masses in riot; "The Seeker," a dithyramb in praise of science, for Verhaeren does not see in it the antithesis of poetry, since it is to him only one expression of the great world-poetry.

They are passionate and excessive visions that the poet



evokes in these pages, and his rhythm here first enters upon its fullest sweep. It is flame-like, it expands and contracts, it undulates. In it are the noises of the street, the grumbling of the crowd in revolt, the shots of the soldiers, the rumbling of trains, and the steely hammering of factories. Sublime poetry is achieved with subjects which, had Ruskin had his way, would have been eradicated from the face of the earth.

Verhaeren would not seek, along with Tolstoy, the asceticism of primitive Christianity. Rather he turns toward the future. Much have the cities destroyed of what was noble and good of the past, but likewise they will create much to replace what has been lost. Whether for better or worse, he does not pretend to say. In one of the poems he refers to the ages with their immobile popes, martyrs, and heroes kneeling before the Christ, and they seem to him to tremble under the noise of a distant train which rolls through the city.

After the publication of this volume, all Belgium joined to render public homage to the poet, and in February, 1896, he was the guest of honor at a banquet held in Brussels, where he was acclaimed as the regenerator of Belgian poetry.

A deeper serenity becomes more and more apparent in the books that follow, even though they are filled with the same fervor; and in them his art broadens. In *Toute la Flandre* he again goes to his beloved Flanders and gathers its dunes, cities, coasts, landscape, heroes, and legends, as details for a huge organic whole.

Another influence also enters his work. He leaves the visual present, and an ethical and philosophical element becomes more and more predominant. Behind the apparent chaos and agony of the new world in the process of birth, there must be a mysterious power making for unity. To understand it and to interpret it is his purpose, and his yearning is "to live ardent and clear."

Zweig has well summarized the development of Verhaeren's later work when he says:

"In *Les Visages de la Vie* Verhaeren has sung in individual poems the glory of the eternal forces, mildness, joy, strength, activity, enthusiasm; in *Les Forces Tumultueuses* he has portrayed the mysterious dynamics of harmony and its translucence through the forms of reality; in *La Multiple Splendeur* the theme consists of the ethics of enthusiasm and the relations of man to the external world and of men to each other;

in *Les Rhythmes Souverains* he shows the most conspicuous examples of the ideals."

Adam and Eve, Hercules, Perseus, Saint John, the Barbarians, the Crusades, Martin Luther, Michael Angelo, Gold, the master, the approaches, the city, the people, prayer, the ship—thus runs the sequence of the last volume.

The old gods are dead, long live Jehovah, the one and only God! But He too is either asleep or dying, and the old force has gone out of Him; therefore hail to humanity! Something like this trembles as an undercurrent in this work. Humanity to him is not the vague Positivist abstraction, but a powerful force ever in ebb and flow which must be roused and to which the poet must give himself with abundant enthusiasm and fervor.

The visions become more abstract and universal, and a tendency toward a more mystical view becomes apparent. A certain vagueness and inclination to become oracular is not always avoided, but even here he never becomes merely rhetorical as Victor Hugo and Schiller so often do. He no longer attempts to express himself alone, but the struggle and endeavor of his age and the world about him. His rhythm now has in it something of the sweep of ocean waves. He has always loved the sea and carried its rhythms over into his poetry; but in his earlier work the sea is a restless malign force which reaches out to devour the land; now it becomes something sacred, "one and pure like an idea," and a symbol of ceaseless force in eternal unrest.

Two poems to "The Wind," written about ten years apart, show still more clearly the change that has come over the poet. In the earlier one the wind is a hostile power which beats and tears to tatters the villages and hamlets. It is grim and angry. It destroys the birds' nests in the trees, it tosses the leaves, it pierces through the cracks of the stables; the old thatched roofs moan under it, the crosses in the cemetery fall beneath it. It screams with cold and is the symbol of erratic wandering, fear, and flight. In the later poem the wind is a wanderer whom the poet loves with the air and the distance. It comes from Sicily where it has gathered the smiles of the gods; from England, Ireland, Jersey, and Brittany with mists in the hair and garbed in rain; over the entire world it passes. From everywhere it brings something clear, pure, and infinitely whole. It ever renews the strong feeling for life.

Without entering more deeply into the philosophy of his later work, the story of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Paradise, as he has rewritten it in *Les Rhythmes Souverains*, seems to symbolize his attitude toward life.

They dwell in Paradise in idyllic simplicity, but deep unrest in time comes over both. Eve desires love, Adam knowledge. The traditional idea of sin has no place. In the new world where they must toil and eat bread in the sweat of their brow the primeval order of God no longer exists, but around them there is a new rhythm that wavers uncertain and menacing at first. The man, desiring knowledge, soon feels the magnetic attraction of the world, and strength and greatness grow in him to fulfil his destiny; the woman, whose body has grown more beautiful by love, waits for the motherhood that is to come. New responsibilities have come to both and also new pride, new courage, and new hope. Once in the evening Eve reapproached Paradise. Its gates were wide open, but without desire she turned her head away and never returned to the spot.

The theme of romantic love, which has been the well-spring of inspiration to so many poets, particularly in their earlier work, is curiously absent in Verhaeren. He is too masculine and strong to have been caught in the prevailing hyperæsthesia toward sex, which has produced so many exotic flowers in modern poetry. Love to him is only one of the great elemental forces and too self-evident to become a problem.

But love finds a place among his books in the two slender volumes, *Les Heures Claires* and *Les Heures d'Après-midi*, to which a third, *Les Heures du Soir*, has recently been added. They are dedicated to his wife and are among the most tender and intimate poems that have ever been written. From his other work it might have been expected that they would be wild and of uncurbed passionateness; instead, they are his softest and gentlest work. In them the tenderness of a strong man, which is more infinite than any other, finds utterance. They are simple as Verlaine's poems in *La Bonne Chanson* are simple, and as full of devotion and worship, and greater, perhaps, for they sing of a love that has grown stronger and deeper in its marvel of understanding and renewal as the years have gone by. They tell of the things of daily life. In one it is the calm good evening

hour when the lamp is lit and the simple things are told of the fruit that has been gathered in the garden and the flower that has opened; in another, the evening sky has unfolded and the moon watches over the silence, everything is pure and clear and powerful, there can be no room for doubt when holy trust rests like a sleeping child in souls. To the great poet there is as much beauty in the simplicity of things as in more resounding themes, and nowhere has this been shown as well as here. So wonderful has been his skill that the lines never break to strike a discord in the low soft music of the verse.

Mere description is unable even to suggest the fragrance and sincerity that permeates these lines. The "*gens trop sages*" may mock and smile in their sophistication. A modern of the moderns whose themes often have been the hard hostile forces of steel and industry has here sung the gratitude, tenderness, and peace of a love that grows richer each day, in a series of poems that gleams with the soft light of pearls.

Verhaeren has also written four plays: *Les Aubes* (translated into English by Arthur Symons), *Le Cloître*, *Philippe II*, and *Hélène de Sparte*. While they have had an occasional production on the stage, they remain principally "closet" dramas.

O. F. THEIS.